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ABSTRACT

The quality of instruction may be similar in both traditional/graded and innovative/nongraded classrooms. This essay discusses the results of instruction observed in several nongraded (of varying degrees) Swedish schools serving grades 7-9. A multigraded organization requires more planning by teachers for individualization of instruction, and greater cooperation among members of the teaching team. Teachers in nongraded classrooms spend more time guiding their students' learning activities and less time completing administrative tasks. Pupils take a more active role in the educational process. Results indicate: (1) pupils in nongraded schools tend to take a more positive view toward classmates, teachers, and school than do pupils in graded schools; (2) girls, in both types of schools, do better on exams in mathematics and English than do boys; (3) whether students commute to school or board at school seems to be unrelated to their test scores; and (4) the type of school attended seems to be of minor importance to boys. It was concluded that nongraded instruction is a perfectly adequate alternative to graded instruction and it presents certain advantages in terms of satisfaction. (RL)

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BACKGROUND

During the 1970s, the slogan "We won't move" came to symbolize efforts to retain schools in the pupils' home areas. Attention was drawn to the value of young people's own social environment. The small country school was compared with the anonymity of the central city school. The fact that a number of small senior level elementary schools were faced with closure because of declining population figures gave policy makers and educational planners food for thought. How does a small school actually operate? What is the minimum size of a viable senior level unit? How is the everyday school life of senior level pupils affected by the closure of their local school? How important is the survival of the local school? There were many questions pressing for an answer, and the school closure cases now pending had to be decided pragmatically.

This was the background to an experimental scheme of non-graded senior level teaching known as the PANG Project, PANG being short for "Process Analysis of Non-Grading" (Andrae 1980).

In view of the many years' experience previously accruing from B-type integrated classes in the unreformed elementary school, it might seem, looking back, as though experiments on these lines should have been an obvious recourse much earlier. Could it be that classes of this kind were considered an inferior alternative to the conventional (A) type?

PREMISES

The original initiative leading to the experimental scheme of a non-graded senior level came as early as 1969 from a group of teachers at the senior level elementary school at Stöllet, in the County of Värmland, which was threatened with closure.

These teachers wanted to work across the grade boundaries in order to raise the numbers of children for their working groups and thus salvage their senior level. Their proposals were based on a non-graded school incorporating those ideas of individual working methods and planning and teaching co-operation which had come to be increasingly emphasized in the debate on education. Project work as described in the 1969 Elementary School Curriculum (Lgr 69) furnished an important example in this context.

But non-graded senior level teaching required certain alterations to the time schedule then in force in that the senior level resource (the State grant towards teachers' salaries) had to be freely deployable. An ad hoc administrative decision known as the Finnskoga-Dalby Authorization (SFB 1969/70, p. 2160) made it possible for the teacher ppw resource to be redeployed for inter-grade instruction, and four more schools, namely the senior level elementary schools at Ramsjö, Hallen, Solberg and Tärnaby, were similarly allowed to introduce non-graded teaching with effect from the school year 1972/73. (Figure 1.)

EVALUATION OF NON-GRADED TEACHING. STRUCTURE AND CONDUCT OF THE INQUIRY

One of the main topics of inquiry within the PANG Project has concerned the educational effects of the experimental scheme of non-grading. The total situation of the pupils and their families, regarding occupations, leisure, migratory predisposition and the role of the senior level school in their lives and the life of the community, has also been covered in the project, in view of the important influence of distances and school transport on the living environment in general and the school environment in particular. Comparisons were made with senior level schools in municipalities which had the same economic structure but where large numbers of pupils either had

to travel a long way to and from school or else had to lodge near their schools. The schools thus selected were those in Lima, Rätan, Fredrika, Moskosel, Svenstavik, Sorsele, Arjeplog and Vilhelmina. (Figure 1.)

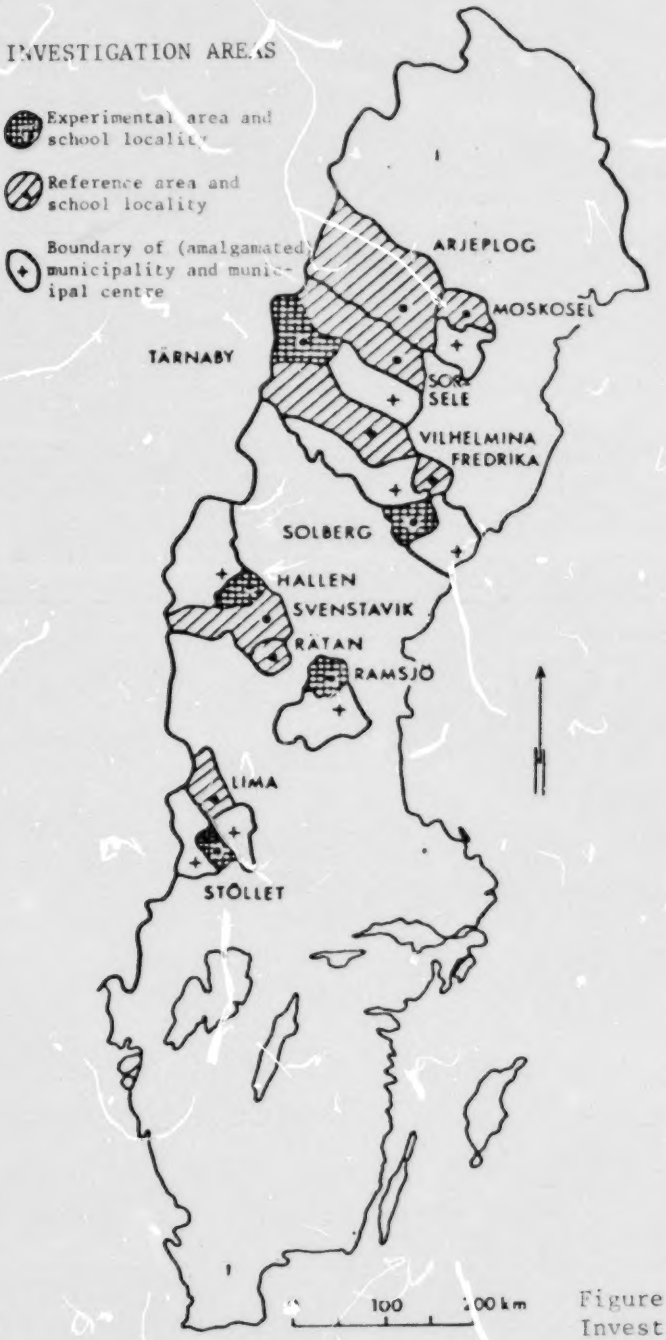

Figure 1
Investigation areas

The main emphasis of the evaluation is on a general analysis of didactic problems. Earlier teaching research has shown that factors such as the composition of the class restrict and to some extent govern the teaching process (Dahllöf 1967, Lundgren 1972). These studies, however, were concerned with fairly straightforward class instruction, with all the pupils in a department or class being taken by a single teacher without any great variety of working methods. In a non-graded system where the boundaries between grades are eliminated and the level (formerly three grades) is regarded as a single working unit, restrictions of this kind should become fewer, and more scope should be available for individualization and the variation of working methods. In order to depict this instruction as realistically as possible, we monitored it for a complete school year by means of questionnaires, interviews and lesson observations.

NON-GRADED INSTRUCTION. ORGANIZATION AND PRECONDITIONS

The experimental scheme was based on a modification of Time Schedule 5 A (Lgr 69), covering two or three senior level grades. The actual modifications varied from one school to another, but their underlying principle was the same. In the grades and subjects planned for non-grading, the numbers of pupil ppw were added together and divided by the number of integrated grades. In this way the total number of ppw/pupil for the whole of senior level remained unaltered.

The experiment made it necessary for senior level to be regarded as a single entity and for planning to be conducted on a three-year basis from the very outset. A number of subjects were timetabled parallel, as was necessary for the sake of non-graded teaching and flexible groupings. Options were integrated between grades in all schools except Tärnaby. In most of the schools, the general and special courses in second foreign languages were amalgamated. The main emphasis of inter-

grade integration was on social and scientific subjects and options. Altogether the Stöllet pupils had the largest proportion of non-graded periods (60 per cent), as compared with 40 per cent at Ramsjö and Hallen and 25-27 per cent at Solberg and Tärnaby. (Figure 2.)

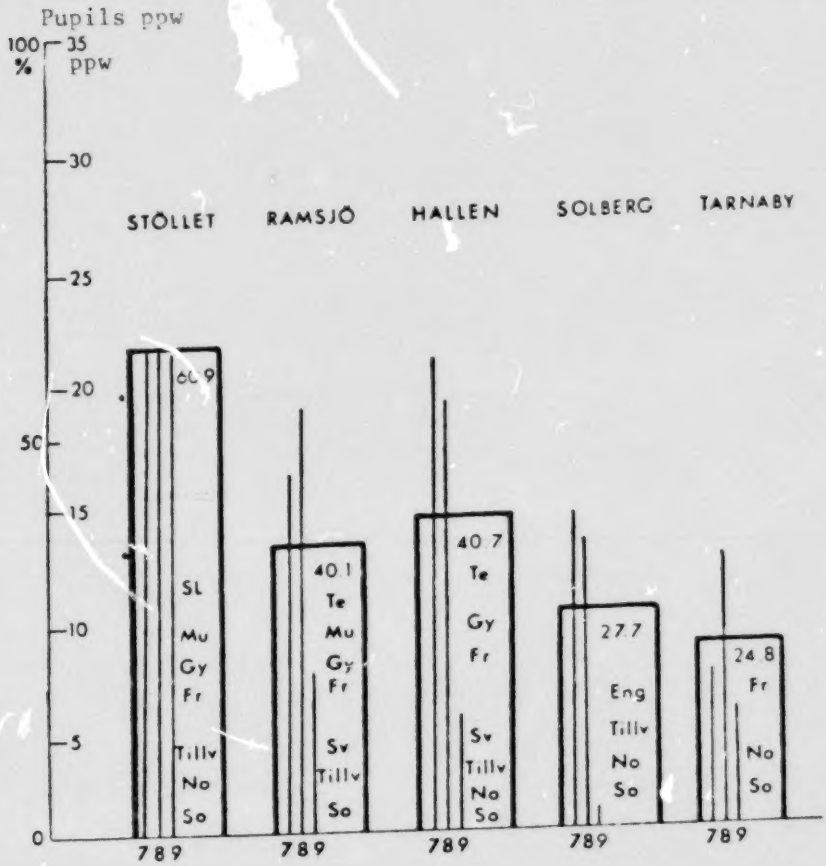

Figure 2. Extent of non-grading in the experimental schools. Grades 7-9, compared with Time Schedule 5, class type A. Elementary School Curriculum, 1969.

SL = Handicraft, Mu = Music, Gy = P.E., Fr = French, Tillv = optional subjects, No = science subjects, So = Social subjects, Te = drawing, Eng = English

As we shall see, the changed conditions entailed by opportunities of variable grouping and the re-structuring of course content resulted in the variation of working methods and a transformation of the teacher role. We may note that the inter-grade organization adopted in the experimental schools did a great deal to influence the planning and conduct of teaching.

The planning of instruction was a great deal more extensive and required a great deal of extra work input in the experimental schools, as regards both content and working procedures. This applies equally to general, long-term planning and to planning of a more short-term, detailed character, and it applies particularly to social subjects. It is a widespread opinion among teachers in the experimental schools that the Curriculum provides insufficient guidance and support for this unconventional planning. For example, the experimental schools require more instructions concerning the nature of basic skills in the various subjects. Discussion and awareness concerning the problem of individualization have probably been more vigorous in these schools as a result of the experimentation, thus bringing the questions to a head. Co-operation with colleagues is another important point, which the teachers emphasize concerning the planning of non-graded teaching.

In addition to planning alterations, non-grading also entailed alterations to teaching. The biggest differences in this respect between experimental and reference schools concerned social subjects. A distinct group work approach to projects was the predominant working procedure for these subjects in one of the experimental schools and was commonly practised in the others. This approach has transformed the teacher role and led to great variety in the assignments undertaken by pupils.

The roles of both teachers and pupils in the experimental schools differ from their counterparts in the reference schools.

Teachers in the experimental school are a great deal more occupied with tasks relating to guidance and assistance, and they spend less time on administration. At the same time, their pupils are more active during lessons. During the introductory phase the teachers scrutinized various teaching materials with great care and selected those containing sections and tasks of varying degrees of difficulty, which was an important consideration in this context. As is therefore to be expected, the teachers are positively disposed towards the teaching materials used.

We can also establish that the widest variety of working methods between these schools concern social subjects. Traditional elements also occur. Finally we may note that general planning has also affected teaching design at lesson level, in terms of teaching structure, the role of the teacher, and pupil behaviour. Lesson observation data provide further confirmation of previous observed tendencies.

SATISFACTION AND SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

On repeated occasions in past years, and most recently in the policy resolution concerning a new Elementary School Curriculum (Government Bill 1978/79:180), the transformation of elementary school working methods has been described as an essential prerequisite of cognitive development, personal adjustment and satisfaction on the part of the pupils. Are any positive effects in these respects observable in the experimental schools, where a more individualized working procedure has been employed, involving a greater measure of pupil activity? The results are not clear enough for this question to be answered categorically.

When studying attitudes to the subjects included in the experimental activities, one finds great similarities between the experimental and reference schools, between individual schools and between grades. The pupils in the experimental schools

tend to take a more positive view of the subjects than their counterparts in the reference schools.

There are great similarities between experimental and reference schools as regards test results and marks, but the tendencies provide a more balanced picture. Girls in the experimental schools do best in examinations, while boys in the experimental schools gain lower marks. The few statistically reliable differences concern test results and marks for mathematics (special course) and marks for English (special course) gained by the girls at the experimental schools. Was the experiment more beneficial to the girls than to the boys? Does the earlier maturity of girls make them more suitable for the working procedure employed, while boys on the other hand are more dependent on a school being small? Both tests and marks suggest as much.

If any of these schools were to close down, the alternative would be long journeys to and from school or else boarding accommodation for the pupils concerned. The above findings do not suggest that non-graded instruction has impaired results. But this in turn moves one to ask whether long journeys to and from school and boarding accommodation are so detrimental as they have often been painted in public debate. Surveys conducted so far have not clearly confirmed this. In the present inquiry I have been able to establish that neither long journeys nor boarding accommodation have been detrimental to pupils in terms of test results and marks. Once again, however, the girls have a certain lead; in this particular instance it is the long-distance girls who distinguish themselves.

One reason for these signs of differences between the sexes may be that, in addition to maturing earlier, girls are more motivated than boys for school. Furthermore, in sparsely populated rural areas, leisure activities are likely to compete more seriously with school work among boys than among girls. But not even these comparisons suggest that boys are disadvan-

taged in either school environment. Thus a bigger and more amply equipped school would not have presented any educational advantages in this respect. At the same time we may note that long journeys and boarding accommodation have not prejudiced the pupils' school performance.

Where journeys to and from school are concerned, however, there are many questions one has to try to answer. School transport itself is an extensive problem which can be elucidated in much greater detail with the aid of the questions which, over and above those already mentioned, are included in the data material from the PANG Project. In this connection I have had to confine myself to an initial comparison and analysis of a few of the questions.

Regardless of whether pupils are taking part in the experimental activities or not, and irrespective of school journeys and dwelling conditions, their attitude towards classmates, teachers and school, as reflected by my material, indicates declining involvement in terms of positive disposition. The ranking order of attitudes towards classmates, teachers and school is the same in the experimental schools as in the reference schools, but attitudes in the experimental schools are consistently more positive. It is abundantly clear, however, that the girls in the experimental schools are most positive. As far as the boys are concerned, the type of school attended seems to be of minor importance.

SUMMARY

Summing up, the experimental activities have shown that non-graded teaching at senior level is an adequate alternative to graded instruction where school transport or boarding accommodation would otherwise have been necessary.

Non-graded teaching has provided many encouraging experiences which deserve to be directly implemented and developed further. Once again, however, it should be emphasized that none of the schools has been entirely non-graded. Instead they have successfully tested various models involving different degrees of non-grading. In other words, there is unlikely to be a general model which is valid for all situations. The model to be chosen is a question to be examined and pondered ad hoc. Liberty concerning the utilization of resources has made it possible for schools to vary their teaching organization.

From a teaching viewpoint, the small schools - non-graded or otherwise - are fully acceptable alternatives to the larger ones, as far as I have been able to see. But the larger schools are more economical in terms of directly measurable costs, though if a wider socio-economic perspective is adopted, so that travelling times for long-distance pupils and the pupils' general satisfaction are also taken into account, it may be found that factors of this kind carry a great deal of weight even if they cannot be expressed in such simple terms as, say, teachers' salaries. The time a pupil has to spend travelling to and from school, after all, is also a price to be included in a total assessment.

With non-graded teaching one finds that working methods vary according to the specific needs of the individual schools and that pupils are happier. Thus a relaxation of grade boundaries, and with them the composition of the class, has opened the way to a wider variety of working methods and of teacher and pupil roles. It is impossible in my opinion to state categorically whether non-graded instruction is better than graded instruction. The answer to this question depends instead on how much work and finance one is prepared to commit, to what extent one wishes to shape one's own working situation and develop teaching, and what other motives are involved in the retention of the school concerned. The essential purpose of this inquiry has been to establish that school work can vary quite consider-

ably, depending on whether instruction has beed graded or non-graded and on whether or not a school has had several parallel grades. Moreover, the inquiry has shown that non-graded instruction is a perfectly adequate alternative and that it also presents certain advantages in terms of satisfaction.

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